

# Commander's Perspective

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## Introduction

Though you may not be in a commanding role for many years, the techniques discussed in this lesson are valuable for strengthening your officership qualities. During your training, listen to what will be asked of you – how you'll be challenged everyday, then think about your reaction. You are the leaders of tomorrow, and everyone is watching. Your reading is an article written by General Bennie L. Davis while he was commander of the Air Training Command (the forerunner of Air Education and Training Command.)

## Study Assignment

Read the information section of this lesson.

Lesson Objective: Comprehend the commander's perspective as it pertains to the expectations of newly arrived commissioned personnel.

Sample of Behavior: Based on the article *Officership, a Profound Commitment that Transcends Personal Gain* by General Davis, identify the expectations of senior commanders.

## Information

### **Officership, a Profound Commitment that Transcends Personal Gain**

General Bennie L. Davis

Were I called upon today for an assessment of the state of the Air Force, I could honestly report that it's good – strong, ready to carry out any assigned mission.

But I would add a thought once expressed by Oliver Wendell Holmes, an observation as pertinent now as it was when he uttered it. "In this great world today," he said, "it is not where we stand, but the direction in which we are moving."

The thought hits home because it gets to the heart of a problem that's been bothering me more and more recently – that the great social forces at work throughout our society, including the military, seem to be stressing personal welfare and comfort above the timeless virtues of loyalty, cooperation and selflessness.

## Identity Crisis

Two recent Air Force studies have given substance to this nagging apprehension of mine. In one, Captain Frank Wood of the Air Force Academy interviewed 40 junior officers to try to determine their norms and values. He found that they're experiencing a confusing – and in my view quite dangerous – identity crisis. According to Wood's sample, many of us are coming to view ourselves more as managers or specialists than as Air Force officers.

Another study, by Majors Joseph Daskevich and Paul Nafziger, produced some similarly disturbing results. While the majority of officers surveyed felt that an Air Force career should be more than just an occupation, only 43 percent of them believed that other officers acted as if it were, and – even more telling – only one in four reported he personally felt a “deep personal commitment,” a “calling” to serve the nation.

## Test of the Century

I repeat: These perceptions and attitudes are not just unsettling; they're dangerous. Our country, which was founded on the ideals of individual equality bonded into collective responsibility and strength, cannot long endure in a climate in which personal and financial securities are the sole measures of success. Vince Lombardi, a former football coach of mine at West Point, was prescient in this regard. “The test of this century,” he said, “is whether we mistake growth of wealth and power for growth in strength and character. We've weakened discipline and respect for authority and let the freedom of the individual predominate.”

Some students of the military say the seeds of the problem were planted when we began to allow our traditional sense of ethics and responsibility to be replaced by the “pragmatic” ethos of the businessman, the marketplace, and the corporation. This, they say, has led to substitution of seminars on management practices for discussions of the qualities that constitute leadership. In short, the critic's contention is that we're shifting emphasis from developing our abilities to inspire and lead people into merely managing them.

There may be some merit to that premise. If so, a big contributor to this change in approach – philosophy, if you will – has been the steady growth of technology. Perhaps as our Air Force has become more technically oriented, we've become inclined to stress the skill factor at the expense of the military one, with the result that we're treating our subordinates more like employees than members of our fraternity, with an attendant loss of cohesion. Admittedly, career-minded, ambitious young men and women are healthy for the Air Force. I'll go even further: They're a necessity. But self-interest, when placed above commitment to the unit as a whole, can destroy a military organization.

In any event, these changes in attitude among our young officers and airmen have spawned some thorny problems. In the long run their negative impact could more than counterbalance our steady advances in the physical sciences.

## What is Leadership?

To forestall that possibility, we're going to need the best leadership we've ever had. This raises an obvious question: "What is leadership?"

We don't know exactly. What we do know is that if we create, build, and sustain it, proper leadership will stimulate managerial skills and functions and bring other resources to life. Conversely, we know that without it, work in any office or ship, or on any flight line, must inevitably grind to a halt.

Leadership is a mysterious, only vaguely understood force. But it does immediately evoke other words and concepts – like professionalism, for instance. And that in turn leads logically to still another, which I believe encompasses the best elements of both. It's an attitude/concept/philosophy that we in Air Training Command have dubbed officership. In it professionalism, leadership, and good management are interwoven with the priceless qualities of integrity, honesty, and selflessness.

But officership also resists precise definition. One thing can be stated with assurance: Officership is not a thing, not a commodity. While in many ways it could be labeled an intangible, paradoxically it's very real – the blood, breath, soul and muscle of a living institution, our Air Force.

## Characteristics of Leadership

I guess the best way to try to analyze it – give it form and substance – would be to list some of its known qualities and discuss a few of its characteristics.

Certainly, one extremely important element of officership is loyalty, aptly described as the military touchstone.

Loyalty has many faces: First, there's "two-way-street" loyalty that which we expect from our superiors and in turn are obligated to extend to our subordinates.

A second, equally important face of loyalty is loyalty to ourselves, to our moral, ethical, and professional ideals, under girded with the courage to defend a position to all proper limits.

But transcending these is the loyalty spelled out in the oath we took when we became commissioned officers in the Air Force: loyalty to country. At that time we swore we would be guardians not only of the material blessings the people of this nation have enjoyed for more than 200 years, but would also be equally stalwart, committed defenders of the ideal, the dream and the glory that is America.

So let's grant that loyalty helps give the concept of officership a bit more tangible shape. What are some of the other ingredients?

## **Importance of the Individual**

There are those who maintain – mistakenly – that as modern machines of war have become more versatile and effective, the importance of the individual in combat (along with concepts like officership) has been reduced. Nothing could be more in error: The demands on the individual have never been greater. Today one officer is often entrusted with potentially devastating force. In his hands could easily rest the survival of his comrades. So on what bases can we decide to entrust a particular person with such awesome responsibility? Experience? Yes. Skill? Yes. Proven capabilities and performance? Yes. Demonstrated courage? Yes.

But there are additional important criteria, albeit of a less specific nature, that must be considered. We must be sure that the person we select possesses unfaltering devotion to the sterling standards of duty, honor, country, and integrity. In the composite, these are the qualities that distinguish the true military professional. They serve a taskmaster, incentive, and guide.

## **Commitment**

Another definite component of officership is commitment. Ours is a unique profession. We have committed ourselves to give our lives, if necessary, in the service of our country. Certainly no other calling makes the demand on its members.

But there's an equally compelling adjunct to that commitment – our commitment to those we lead. Some of you may already have had to order your subordinates into battle. Others may have to do so in the future. No leader should ever be given the responsibility of asking subordinates to risk their lives on his orders unless he believes utterly that life is sacred, that it should only be laid on the line for a purpose of transcendent value to society.

## **Sensitivity to Needs**

There's yet another element integral to the leader/subordinate relationship: the professionals' sensitivity to the needs of those for whom we are responsible. Only by becoming knowledgeable about their problems and about them as individuals, can we become involved sufficiently to help them, thus creating a climate in which loyalty and discipline can thrive. This personal involvement and understanding has become especially urgent in recent years as many of our young NCOs and airmen have to struggle with the problems and frustrations caused by inadequate pay and compensation.

True officership has many other facets, among them the unique collective character of the officer corps, pride in service, our commonality of interests and a sense of challenge. Another – one I'd like to discuss – underscores the uniqueness of our profession mentioned above.

I refer to the breadth and depth of vision, the panoramic view of the world we gain from our career experiences in the Air Force. This education and growth, the

product of association and interaction with peers, superiors, subordinates, and our foreign allies, far transcends formal academic limits. As individually no man is an island, there is no career field in the Air Force that can survive in isolation. As an officer works with a myriad of others over the years, his or her horizons inevitable broaden.

## **Drive to Learn**

There's a popular notion that leaders, including those who wear military uniforms, are born, not made. There may be a bit of truth in that; but I believe it's far more a case of a personal drive to learn – using that word in its broadest sense. The famed T.E. Lawrence, “Lawrence of Arabia,” makes my case for me: “I was not an instinctive soldier, automatic with intuitions and happy ideas,” he wrote. “When I took a decision, or adopted an alternative, it was after studying every relevant – and many an irrelevant – factor: Geography, tribal structure, religion, social customs, language, appetites, standards – all were at my finger ends.

“The same with tactics,” he continued. “To use aircraft I learned to fly. The same with strategy, (where) I levied contributions from my predecessors of five languages. Generalship, at least in my case, came of understanding, of hard study and brainwork and concentration...Use me as a text to preach for more study of books and history, a greater seriousness in military art. With 2,000 years of examples behind us we have no excuse, when fighting, for not fighting well.” Various critics have argued that the military should be concerned with specialization in specific fields, rather than in officership. Some of our own officers have become almost obsessed with pay, benefits, working conditions, and types of tasks to be done. They have expressed discontent with what they feel is owed to the completion of a mission. Such self-centeredness automatically diminishes the importance of loyalty and esprit de corps, detouring the young officer from the road to officership.

## **Performance Takes Precedence**

Please don't misunderstand: No one would think of arguing that benefits, pay and compensation, and the conditions under which we work, aren't important. Of course they are. But they cannot – must not – be permitted to take precedence over the fundamental tenet that each individual's performance as a team member determines the ultimate state of our nation's readiness.

For the record, let me interject once more that I, for one, am still not fully persuaded that traditional Air Force values have been completely abandoned. I know that when you chose to become officers in the American military, you certainly didn't expect to become millionaires. But I can personally assure you that the fulfillment that becomes yours as you pursue a selfless career is worth far more than a million. And as far as the nation is concerned, your talents and dedication, although perhaps not always fully appreciated, are priceless assets.

No. I reiterate that the “old-fashioned” values such as patriotism, loyalty, honor, integrity, and duty are still very much alive. They're the cornerstones on which

an effective defense posture will always be constructed. Because as has been said many times before (but it bears repeating): The most sophisticated weapon systems are worthless without quality, motivated people to operate, maintain and support them – plus, I insist, officership.

## **Balance Perspective**

As stated earlier, I believe that an officer, whether pilot, infantry officer, engineer or personnel expert, must have a balanced perspective based on the widest reasonable exposure to different missions and functions. True, this conviction results partly from our need to fill everyday requirements. This openly acknowledged goal has given rise to the myth in some quarters that we try to train all our officers to be chief of staff. That's patently ridiculous. Not that it's not a worthy goal; but few reach it. No. What we're doing is attempting to develop the individual characters of all Air Force officers – nurturing officership.

Also, some think that because the military services collectively are huge, they resemble large civilian organizations. We do perform many similar functions, use many of the same techniques, and follow many of the same principles. But we're not a commercial airline. We're not an industrial corporation. We are an instrument of national policy, a guarantor of national security, a weapon of national defense.

To amplify that, an official of a civilian corporation may spend an entire career in a single area such as marketing, finance, or personnel management. And if an additional expert is needed – an engineer, a maintenance supervisor, a corporate vice-president – the company simply goes to the market place and hires one.

But that kind of management practice simply doesn't work in the military. There's a profound difference between the Air Force officer who possesses a specialized skill and his civilian counterpart: Our successes are measured in terms of national survival, not in annual profits or losses. And when we need to expand our operations to respond to a sudden increase in demand for our services – in case of war, for example – we don't go to a rival firm to hire additional experts, executives or leaders. We draw from our own. That's the basic "why" of officership; every officer must be ready to respond instantly, prepared and confident.

What it all boils down to, I suppose, is that in the Air Force we're in the business of producing disciplined but creative, innovated, broad-gauged thinkers. We want to develop officers who have every opportunity to speak out loudly and clearly in defending their point of view. There's just one caveat: They must never forget for an instant that they are members of the military – remember that in a time for decision always arrives eventually, and that when it does, as officers they are obligated to give the chosen course of action their unconditional support.

## Character, Education

In closing, I'd like to leave you with another thought I remember Coach Vince Lombardi expressing. "Character, not education," he said, "is man's greatest need and man's greatest safeguard. For character is higher than intellect. The real difference between men is in their character and in their energy, in their strong will and their skilled purpose."

That dovetails neatly with my theme. Because officership is also constancy, tradition and possession of the "strong will and skilled purpose." As stated, officership means being able to innovate. But it also means being receptive to the innovation of others, demonstrating unassailable integrity while avoiding rigidity. Officership is being coolheaded in tense situations, but warm-hearted with people.

At the beginning of this essay I warned you that officership was an extremely difficult concept to define in precise terminology. I've done the best I can. It's somewhat like trying to describe a sunset. I know what causes it – the light of the setting sun creates the magnificent colors as it reflects from particles in the air.

But I would find it impossible to tell you what the sunset means to me, deep down.

It's the same with officership. I've enumerated many of the priceless qualities, both intangible and real, embodied in the concept. Each has its individual emotional and intellectual impact. It is in the aggregate that they constitute officership.

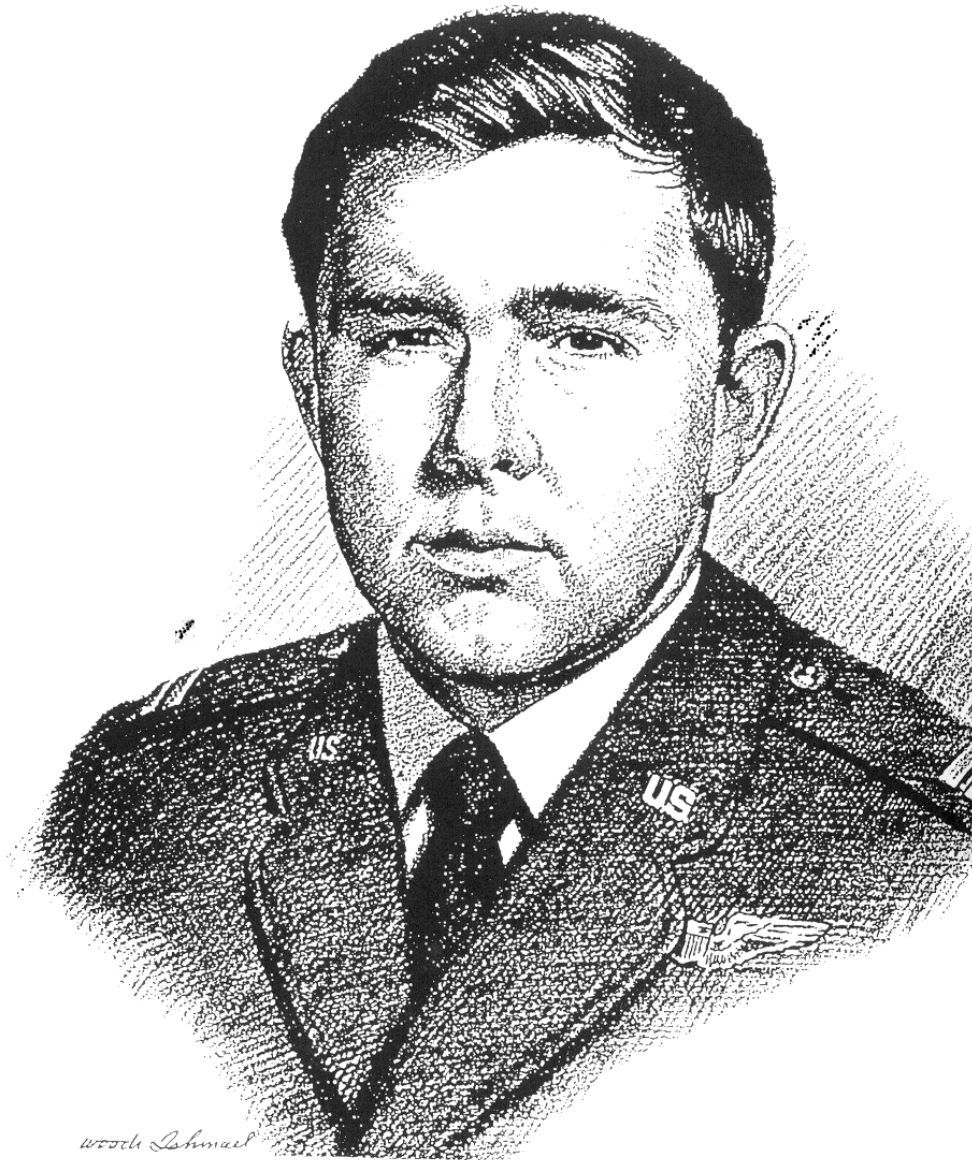
It will take work time and a lot of just plain living for you to grasp all that officership means. But I promise you that when you do, you will be rewarded with a sense of self-fulfillment such as you've never experienced before.

## Conclusion

These words of General Davis ring as true today, as when he wrote them. As you continue your Air Force career, contemplate these words and consider how you can be the best possible officer, for the Air Force and for your country.

### Bibliography:

1. Bennie L. Davis, General, USAF, "Officership: A Profound Commitment that Transcends Personal Gain," *Precommissioning Education Review*, Fall 1980.



## **CAPTAIN STEVEN LOGAN BENNETT**

piloted a light aircraft flying an artillery adjustment mission on June 29, 1972. A large concentration of enemy troops was massing to attack a friendly unit. Captain Bennett requested tactical air and artillery support, but neither was available. Determined to aid the endangered unit, he elected to strafe the hostile positions. After four passes, the enemy began to retreat. On the fifth pass, a surface-to-air missile severely damaged his aircraft's left engine and landing gear. Captain Bennett's observer could not eject, because a missile had shredded his parachute. Although he had a good parachute, Captain Bennett knew if he ejected his observer could not survive. With disregard for his personal safety, he chose to ditch in the Gulf of Tonkin even though a pilot of this type aircraft had never survived a ditching. The impact trapped Captain Bennett, but the observer escaped and was rescued.